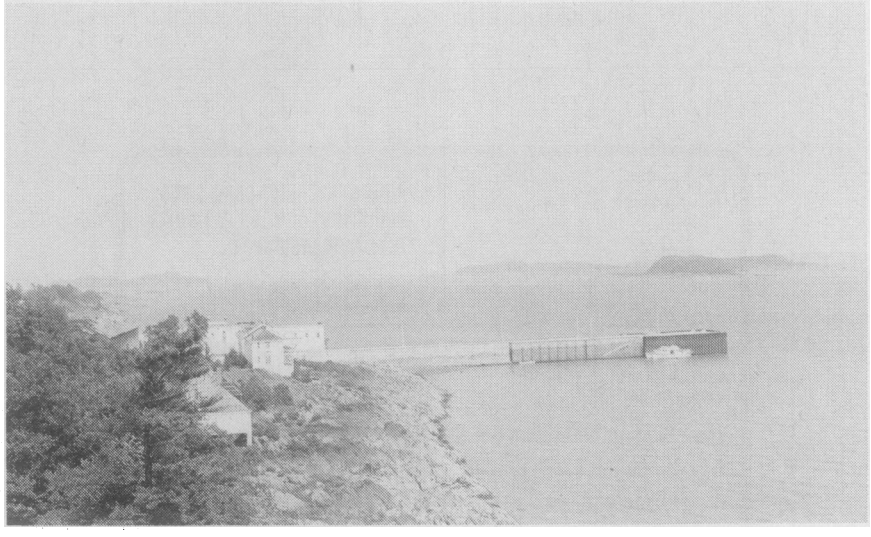
Grosse Ile: island of the dead

BILL TRENT

Our commercial yacht skirts the shore of Ile Sainte-Marguerite and rounds the point of Ile la Sotisse. We are rolling in a gentle swell in the Passage de la Quarantaine, surrounded by the ghosts of 19th century immigrant sailing vessels, headed for quarantine, their holds reeking with the stench of the dead and the dying.

Suddenly, Grosse Ile looms up across our starboard bow, a narrow strip of earth and rock facing south, with a steep, craggy incline behind that obscures its north side. It is 185 hectares in area and one of the highest of the 21 islands of the *archipel des Danaides*, a cluster close to midstream in the St. Lawrence River, 60 kms to seaward from Quebec City.



Its whole official 152-year history has revolved around disease

French settlers of the 17th and 18th centuries knew it as a migratory bird sanctuary — set within the flight path of the great white geese flying down from the north. Immigrants of the 19th century knew it as a place of death.

CMAJ News and Features Editor Brian Bérubé, who took the pictures on these pages, and I have come to explore one of the strangest parcels of government real estate in the country, an island whose whole official 152-year-old history has revolved around disease.

Grosse Ile was established under military command as a quarantine station in 1832 to cope with an epidemic of cholera expected to sweep in from Europe. It was to be the centre of an outer defence network designed to prevent the disease from reaching Québec. The inner line of defence was an anchorage and inspection centre at the mouth of the St. Charles River at Québec, where only vessels whose masters carried permits from Grosse Ile were received.

The Grosse Ile barrier failed to prevent the introduction of cholera into Canada but authorities are generally agreed that it limited the number of victims who managed to get into the interior of the country.

Fifteen years later, in 1847, the station faced up to an even greater challenge: a rampant epidemic of typhus, spreading up-river with shiploads of Irish immigrants, fleeing the famine of their homeland. Confronted with an unprecedented flood of arrivals, tens of thousands of them sick, it would become the scene of one of the most tragic events in the history of Canadian medicine.

Captain Mario Lachance cuts the engine and the boat drifts alongside the quai. Moments later, he throws out the anchor rope. We climb the quai ramp with our landing permits. Nobody just saunters onto this island. It's a maximum security site, now administered by Agriculture Canada. An exuberant 29-year-old Québec-born man named François Duchaine, the island's officer in charge, greets us, then turns to chat with a group of his maintenance men who have come over in the boat with us. It's Monday morning and they are returning to work after a weekend in southshore Montmagny. They have brought several boxes of food with them for the new week.

In the warm sunshine, the grass is a lush green. In the distance, we hear the cawing of crows. Somehow, this little spit of land, in the area of what sailors call the *mélange des eaux*, where fresh and salt water meet and mix, doesn't seem to fit the macabre description of it in historical accounts.

Yet, you still hear the old fearful phrases.

The *island of the dead*, Author Edgar Andrew Collard called it some years ago. Someone else named it *le port des morts*. And an old riverman, questioned by a visitor, once replied, "*Monsieur, c'est le cimetière du fleuve.*"

No one who works on the island will deny it is the graveyard of the St. Lawrence. Here, an estimated 10 000 immigrants (the figure ranges between 8000 and 11 000 according to source) lie buried. Most are Irish, victims of the great cholera and typhus epidemics they brought with them across the Atlan-

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The island was set up under military command as a quarantine station in 1832 to prevent cholera from reaching Quebec City (The 1861 map of the region is courtesy of Public Archives Canada)

tic in the middle years of the last century, though not all. Some are English, or Scottish, some European.

Buried beside them are the dedicated doctors, nurses and other support personnel who died trying to save their lives. And beside *them* are the bones of the priests and ministers who attended to their spiritual needs without regard for the dangers of contagion.

Grosse Ile served as a quarantine area for 105 years, until 1937, but during its last several years shared its work with another station at Pointe-aux-pères, farther downriver. Termination of its quarantine activities, however, didn't mean its links with sickness were at an end. It was merely a turning point in its history.

In 1942, Canada's Department of National Defence turned it into a highly-classified War Disease Control Station, where US and Canadian scientists carried out secret biological warfare research. They studied the effects of viruses on animals and sought ways of controlling their spread. It was a wartime fear that the enemy might try to introduce disease into America through its livestock.

The government dropped a heavy security curtain over the island. Small craft owners were reminded to keep out of the restricted area. The centre closed in 1945 with little or no fanfare. What had gone on there was not a matter of public business. Six years later, a second research facility was established there. Again, its work centred around biological warfare. And again it was top secret.

In 1957, the Department of Agriculture took over the island. Today, its animal pathology division operates an experimental station where veterinarians, most of them government employees, study, and are trained to recognize, exotic diseases in domestic animals. The contagious disease division meanwhile maintains a winter quarantine station for beef cattle and other large animals, imported into Canada by breeders.

Grosse Ile managed to maintain its state of public isolation for over a century and a half but in 1980, Canada's Historic Sites and Monuments Board recognized it as an historical location and now there is a new role in the making for it. Parks Canada officials see it as a potential commemorative area, accessible to visitors, and have already compiled an inventory of its physical properties, identifying those with heritage qualities.

Timing of the project depends on completion of a new centre for the study of exotic diseases in Ottawa. Scheduled to open in 1988, it will contain what Dr. Norman G. Willis, director of animal pathology for Agriculture Canada, claims will be the most up-to-date facilities in the world. Present laboratory operations on Grosse Ile will be transferred then to Ottawa. The animal quarantine will remain on the island.

Creation of an island park is an idea that has gone over big on the

The hospital, long ago abandoned, dates back to 1870.

south shore. A group of Montmagny residents, for example, has banded together to promote development of the island, forming an organization called the *Corporation de mise en valeur de la Grosse Ile*. The body already has sponsored a number of visits to the island for historians, researchers and interested citizens, arranged in cooperation with Agriculture and Parks Canada.

Grosse Ile could become an important tourist attraction and a boon for the local hospitality industry but the major concern now has to do with the *patrimoine*, the heritage factor. What kind of park should be established? A kind of living museum depicting life on an early Canadian quarantine station is one suggestion.

Most of the 50 buildings on the site are turn-of-the-century vintage, though the hospital and two chapels, one Catholic, the other Anglican, date back to about 1870. None of the original structures from the time of the great epidemics survive, several having been destroyed in a fire in 1878 and the rest torn down and replaced by new construction. The buildings that replaced them, however, are still there and are considered representative of the well-equipped station of the early century. Among them are the decontamination building and laundry where, even as late as the 1900s, the clothing of people with indications of disease were steamed and washed. There, too, are the hotels where passengers were detained during ship inspections. They were listed as first, second and third class, conforming with the class structure of the ships themselves.

The commemorative theme has yet to be defined but Parks Canada is officially committed to the project. There was a brief scare last year when a local newspaper warned that three toxic waste dumps on the island, reportedly containing disease-causing viruses and bacteria, constituted a threat for visitors. Michel P. de Courval, Parks Canada information advisor for the Québec region, discounts the story. "We have no knowledge of any such danger", he states.

François Duchaine is talking about Paddy, the island's resident ghost. "Everybody knows him", he says as we bounce along a primitive island road in the station van. "If something goes wrong, we blame it on him." Paddy has always been a favourite ethereal character among veterinarians attending island courses. "If one of the vets lost an article of clothing, another would say, 'Oh, oh, Paddy must have taken it' ", Duchaine explains. And, since the courses were attended by people from the United States, Europe and even Australia and New Zealand, Paddy became known half way around the world.

We pull up in front of a long, low building that once served as a lazaretto. It is one of several abandoned quarantine buildings and its weathered exterior and cracked panes of glass give it a movie-set ghost town look. "They built it in Québec and had it shipped here section by section", Duchaine points out. "The workers were terrified they would become diseased and refused to stay on the island long enough to do the work."

We pause at the little *cimetière d'en bas* in the eastern section of the island, site of some of the early burials. The plots are orderly, each marked with an appropriate cross. An old iron bench sits forlornly across from the cemetery, as though reserved for some ancient mourner. We go on to inspect a battery of

A typical grave of the eastern cemetery

cannon guarding the river route to Quebec. They were installed by the military as a warning to ships bound for Quebec and Montreal: stop for quarantine inspection, or face the consequences. We poke our heads into a stables area and find a hearse of perhaps 100 years ago, its shafts ready to be harnessed to a horse for the next funeral.

Ghosts? I wonder aloud. Duchaine chuckles. He has been asked about ghosts before. "Just Paddy", he says. But a number of people have experienced nervous moments. A Parks Canada employee admits he jumped when he heard banging around a building he was inspecting. It turned out to be a loose shutter. Someone else told about seeing a strange light in the window of a deserted building. It was the reflection of a light from some distance away.

Grosse Ile is a lonely place in summer. But in winter, when the nor'easters come roaring across the St. Lawrence, tearing away at shingles and hurling snow and ice pellets against windows, it seems even more isolated. (The only contact with the mainland then is by small plane, for which a short strip is maintained regularly.)

Duchaine says that occasionally in the evening, he will leave his common law wife and secretary, Hélène, 25, of Quebec City, alone at home while he visits a member of his maintenance staff. That's when his man's telephone starts ringing. It's Hélène asking François to please come home.

"She doesn't like to be alone in the house", he explains. "She says she hears strange noises. I tell her, 'Look, the house was built way back in 1910. It's old. The pipes crack. The floors creak.' But still she's uneasy."

From an elevated area, we see an indentation in the shoreline. The water below sparkles in the sunshine. Out there, in 1832, the tall ships from England and Ireland waited their turn at inspection. This was to be the island's first bout with disease. Asiatic cholera, which had been raging across the sea, had come to Canada and Grosse Ile had become a hospital island with emergency sheds and tents set up everywhere for the sick. There was no time to dwell on the causes and origins of the disease. There was altogether too much controversy about this already. But every once in a while, a learned medical man would look skyward and wonder. Could it be, as some maintained, that electricity in clouds passing over certain communities produced disease? Could it be, as a British medical journal of the time suggested, that disease was produced by the "abstraction of nervous energy from the cerebral spinal system"? (The real cause of cholera, *vibrio cholerae*, was discovered only in 1883.)

Some 51 000 immigrants were examined at the station in 1832, coming to shore in a shallow backwash that became known as Cholera Bay. Hundreds had fallen ill on the long trip across the ocean and some said the dead were buried in the mud flats. Statistics indicating the number of deaths are lacking. What is known, however, is that the brig *Carrick*, from Dublin, was given a certificate of health to proceed upriver, and it took the disease into Quebec City.

A tribute to the medical men who died

According to medical historian Dr. Sylvio LeBlond, (*Can Med Assoc J* 1954; 71: 288–292) 1954), the cholera epidemic started in the poor, densely-populated rue Champlain area of Lower Town Quebec.

The Catholic chapel is one of 50 remaining buildings

The Celtic cross, erected in 1909: a sad Gaelic message

In a matter of months, 3451 persons had died, out of a total urban population of not more than 30000.

A new wave of cholera swept into Grosse Ile in 1834 and hundreds more victims found death. This time, however, the effect on Lower Canada was less marked. While most of the sick of 1832 had stayed in and around Quebec and Montreal, those of 1834 had gone west, and south to the United States.

It's hard to think of Grosse Ile without recalling its history of disease and death — but not one of the group attending the luncheon buffet François Duchaine has organized for them has a macabre thought. They are Montmagny residents, over from the mainland for the day, and they'll tell you the island is one of the beauty spots of the St. Lawrence.

They have listened to a student guide. They have heard how the king of France ceded the island to Governor Montmagny in the 17th century. There had been a succession of proprietors after. The last, notary Louis Bernier, had rented it to one Pierre Duplain. And, 2 years later, in 1832, the military had taken possession of it for quarantine purposes.

But for those present, history takes second place to nostalgia. Many are people who, at one time or another in earlier years, worked and lived on the island as government employees. Some spent their childhood there. For them, it's a trip back in time, a chance to find old haunts and revive old memories. For a few minutes this day, they will scramble about among the rocks near the battery and seek out the secluded marshes where they remember the pintail ducks and green-winged teal came to nest.

Our afternoon guide is a station maintenance man named Daniel Vézina. He is 27 and was born on the island. His father, Eugène, was once the skipper of a 22-m *goélette* but gave up seafaring to work on the station. Daniel left for the mainland in 1964 because the island school catered only to the very young.

The station's rolling stock is in short supply, so we get into the cab of Vézina's lumbering gravel truck. He pushes the gas pedal to the floor and we climb the narrow, uneven trail, the vehicle groaning all the way. Near the summit of a headland, the truck grinds to a stop. From the top of the cliffs here, it's a sheer 100-m drop to the shoreline below. We are headed now for the island's most impressive tribute to its dead.

Vézina stops to pick raspberries as we walk. The island has an abundance of berries, he says — strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, cherries, gooseberries. He turns his hand palm-up to show the kind of plump, juicy fruit the land produces. Like some of the old-time residents we met at lunch, he displays an affectionate feeling for the island.

In moments, we reach the great Celtic cross, towering high above a bluff overlooking the St. Lawrence. It was erected in 1909 by the Ancient Order of Hibernians of America and carries a sad Gaelic message. The translation reads:

"Fleeing from tyrannic laws and the artificial famine in 1847–48, the children of the Gael died on this isle by the thousands. The American Gaels hereby honor their memory. God save Ireland."

A second inscription reads:

"Sacred to the memory of the thousands of Irish immigrants who, to preserve the faith, suffered famine and exile in 1847–48 and, stricken with fever, ended here their sorrowful pilgrimage."

They called the ships that came to Grosse Ile the "fever fleet" — and they came by the hundreds.

"The manner of transporting the Irish emigrant of '47 fills a black page in the annals of the sea. Anything that could float, or hold a sail, was used to carry him across the sea."

Rev. John A. Gallagher, of St. Alphonsus Seminary, Woodstock, Ont., wrote these words in the Canadian Catholic Historical Association Report for 1935 after a long

study of the Irish movement to America.

Immigrants, he said, were herded into the holds like cattle. The holds were dark and the only ventilation was through the hatchways. There was barely enough water for drinking and cooking — and none for washing. There was a total lack of sanitation. After a day out at sea, the dread typhus was raging in every ship. To make matters worse, a crossing could take as long as 3 months. "Little wonder", the priest wrote, "that the holds of these ships became hotbeds of disease".

On May 8, the *Urania*, out of Cork, arrived at Grosse Ile with a full list of passengers, most of them stricken with typhus. On May 14, the *Syria*, from Liverpool, anchored with 243 passengers. Fifty-two were ill; nine had been buried at sea. At the end of May, according to early historian J.A. Jordan, some 12 000 immigrants had landed on the island, most of them ill. Many had been confined to their ships.

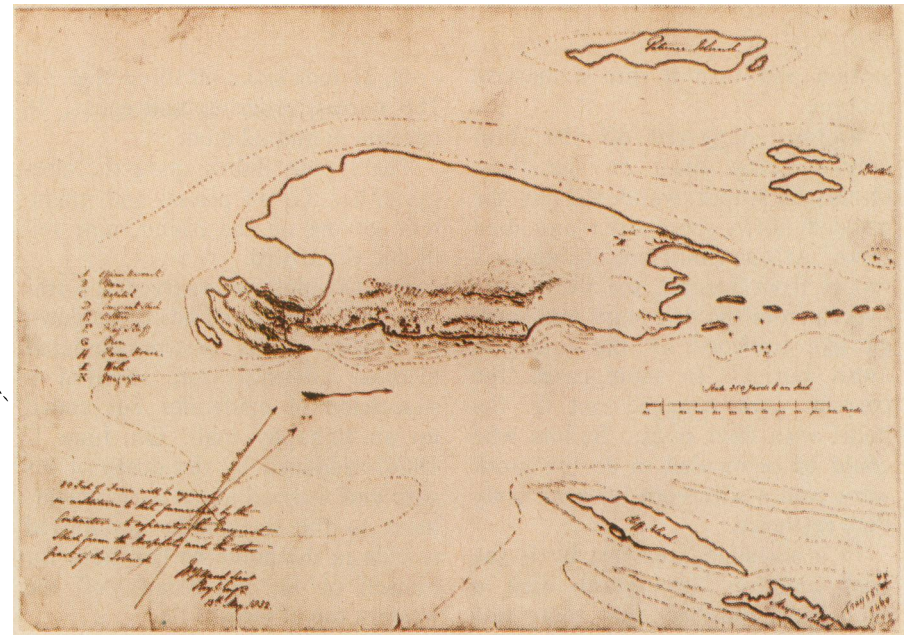
The ships continued to anchor with their tragic cargoes. On Aug. 10, *The Québec Mercury* posted these arrivals: *Bark Ellen Simpson*, from Limerick, four dead.

Bark Larch, from Sligo, 108 dead.

Bark Brothers, from Dublin, six dead.

They were the *dead*. The *dying* far outnumbered them.

Grosse Ile had survived the cholera waves of the 1830s. Now, Dr. George Mellis Douglas, the station's medical superintendent, and his 26 physician-assistants were facing one of the great crises of medical history. Typhus would overwhelm the



Early plans for a quarantine station (Courtesy Public Archives Canada)

station and turn it into a massive morgue.

Victims staggered off the ships only to drop dead on the flats. Others, in stupor, wandered into the wooded north shore area and died there. At one point, according to a report from Jordan, the dead were "taken from the pest ships and corded like firewood on the beach to await burial". In some cases, the corpses were dragged out of the holds with boat hooks. Sailors who could be persuaded to do this work were paid a sovereign for each body they retrieved.

In a secluded area nearby is the Irish cemetery. Immigrants died in such great numbers that there was no time for traditional burials. The station staff dug long trenches — *les fosses communes* they call them now — and placed the hastily-made coffins side by side in two tiers. Because of rocky soil, trenches were left shallow. In fact, only about 7 in. of earth covered them. Soon, hordes of rats began boring into the mounds. Hurriedly, officials ordered large quantities of earth brought in to protect the graves.

Today, the trenches are marked with rows of wooden crosses

The trenches today are marked with rows of wooden crosses, which Daniel Vézina proudly announces were erected by employees of the station as a token of respect.

The epidemic took a heavy toll of medical personnel as well and in the cemetery stands a small monument, erected by Dr. Douglas to the memory of the ill-fated members of his staff. Of 26 doctors, 22 took sick and four died. Of 29 hospital stewards, 21 took sick and three died. Of 186 nurses, orderlies and cooks, 76 became ill and 22 died.

The typhus didn't spare the clergy, either. Of 17 priests and ministers serving on the island, nine fell ill and three died.

Dr. Douglas, who served the station for 25 years and has come down in history as its best-remembered medical administrator, survived a succession of epidemics but ended up an unhappy man. On June 1, 1864, saddened by the death of his wife and worried about a reappointment to the station, he committed suicide in the home he had built for himself on Ile aux Ruaux, off the western top of Grosse Ile.

The quarantine report of December 1847, states that 442 vessels had been inspected during the year and 8691 patients admitted to the island's hospitals, sheds and sick tents. But what was the final toll of dead? How many people actually lie buried on Grosse Ile? An island plaque says 5424 persons, "flying from Pestilence and Famine", are buried there in cemetery plots. But how many more were buried where they dropped? How many were given a watery grave in the St. Lawrence? Ships sometimes carried incomplete passenger lists, leaving a number of people unaccounted for. To complicate matters, the disastrous fire of 1878 destroyed the island registers. So, an accurate number may never be known.

In his book, "The Grosse Ile Tragedy", published in 1909, J.A. Jordan has this to say: "According to official returns, the number of emigrants who died in 1847 was as follows: 4092 at sea; 1190 on board ship at Grosse Ile; and 3389 on Grosse Ile." But he adds: "Other and more reliable reports declare that the total number of the dead and buried on Grosse Ile alone exceeded 10 000; while there is reason to believe that the total mortality among the Irish emigrants, there and elsewhere in Canada, amounted to over 25 000."

Louis R. Richer sits behind the desk in his office in the rue Buade in Quebec, surrounded by books, papers and stacks of notes. Head of history and archaeology for Parks Canada's Quebec region, he is charged with researching the story of Grosse Ile in preparation for establishment of a national park.

The problem of statistics is of less concern to him at the moment than the question of theme. "The human side of the story is so important", he says. "Grosse Ile is part of our heritage. We have never believed in the American melting-pot philosophy. We have always been conscious and respectful of our ethnic roots. And some of those roots lie on that island."

Richer, a quiet-spoken, 39-year-old native of Coteau Station, Que., who studied at the University of Ottawa, speaks with professorial earnestness. The role of the island as an entry point to North America (tens of thousands passed through on their way to the United States) must not be underestimated, he explains. During more than a century as a quarantine station, some 2 million immigrants underwent medical inspection there.

"Many thousands died", he says, "but many more lived. In fact, a large part of Ontario is made up of people whose ancestors followed the St. Lawrence River route through Grosse Ile."

Richer doesn't see it as simply a relic of the past. Rather, he says, it should be part of the continuing Canadian story, a heritage island honouring the country's early immigrant families. There, in years to come, he likes to think, their descendants would go, seeking out their Canadian beginnings. ■